

12-2004

## Critical aspects of communication research: Where do we stand today?

J. Becker

*KomTech-Institute, Germany*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme>

---

### Recommended Citation

Becker, J., Critical aspects of communication research: Where do we stand today?, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 15, 2004, 173-180.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss15/14>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: [research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

# Critical Aspects of Communication Research: Where Do We Stand Today?

*Commentary:*

**Jörg Becker**

*KomTech-Institute, Germany*

Not until after the Second World War did German sociology get back on par with the general Western mainstream that remains the standard to this day. Prior to the Third Reich, various philosophical and sociological schools of thought and traditions had emerged. They were quite unique to Germany and very different from those in other Western countries. It was first and foremost the brutal destruction by the Nazis and then the US modernization policies in post-War Germany that eradicated a specifically German scholarly culture. One of these specific German schools of philosophy was the so-called Frankfurt School around the philosophers Theodor W. Adorno, Erich Fromm, Max Horkheimer, Friedrich Pollock, Leo Löwenthal, Walter Benjamin and Herbert Marcuse (and later Jürgen Habermas).

Founded in 1929, the Frankfurt School should first of all be understood historically. The politically committed social philosophers from Frankfurt primarily had to contend with the following problems:

- Political disappointment given the Stalinist purges in the USSR.
- Political disappointment given that many members of the working class in Germany no longer had a revolutionary mindset of any sort and behaved in a more petty-bourgeois fashion than the petty-bourgeoisie itself.
- Fear of nascent fascism in Germany.
- The need to repel the philosophical logical positivism emerging in Austria associated with the so-called Vienna Circle. Among the members were Rudolf Carnap, Karl Popper, Otto Neurath, Karl Gödel, Herbert Feigl.

Since the Vienna Circle considered the human being as a fact or object, whose actions and behavior could be calculated with scientific precision, its philosophers required no norms, but only facts. Thus, the Viennese group viewed any philosophical speculation on the political implications of human nature, irrespective of what this was understood to mean, with great suspicion. And it was precisely this outlook on the world that the Frankfurt School challenged. In its opinion, the Viennese view was blinkered ideology, because, or so they argued, any purportedly pure scientific definition of the human being actually arose from the reality of the ideological compulsions of capitalism. The Frankfurt philosophers, by contrast, were constantly scrutinizing the empirical and normative explanations that were offered to the detriment of philosophical reflection.

The Frankfurt School was only referred to by that name from the outside. Its proponents termed their approach “Critical Theory” for the simple reason that their reflections hinged on the core concept of “critique”, which they consciously derived from that deployed by Karl Marx, whose understanding of science and scholarship was well described when he noted that the main task of science was to “ruthlessly criticize the extant, ruthless both in the sense that critique does not fear its findings and likewise does not shy from conflicting with the powers that be” (Marx 1967, p. 742).

In other words, Critical Theory is concerned primarily with a discussion of political and economic power. It also focused, from a Marxist perspective, on a reduction of power structures that caused people suffering. In terms of its ethical intentions, Critical Theory endeavored to establish a ruthlessly radical form and method of scholarship.

Against the backdrop of the failed emancipation of the workers in post-Revolutionary Russia, Critical Theory concentrated increasingly on the social conditions that prevented the emergence of class consciousness. “Subjectivity” and “consciousness” as key topics for research increasingly whittled away at the dominance of economics as had been evidenced in their early thought. In this sense the Frankfurt School can be considered to be an interdisciplinary project wedding critical economics (Karl Marx) and critical psychology (Sigmund Freud). And with relation to the scholarly world in the United States and the United Kingdom today, from the viewpoint of the interdisciplinary Critical Theory, the fierce dispute between a school of “political economy” (Herbert I. Schiller) and one of “cultural studies” (Stuart Hall) seems obsolete and absurd.

In other words, given that the Frankfurt School addressed the social conditions of “subjectivity” and “consciousness”, it becomes apparent why they were interested in the mass media, a field studied by Siegfried Kracauer, and the empirical techniques that Paul Lazarsfeld established for evaluating these. Understandably, the Frankfurt School was especially interested in the mass media in the then dictatorships (Germany, USSR) and in the emerging private media industries (United States), as these played an increasingly important role in the shape and expansion of political and economic domination.

In 1933, following Adolf Hitler’s election as Reich Chancellor, the members of the Frankfurt School went into exile in the United States. The events in Germany prompted Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer to write their famous book on the *“Dialectic of the Enlightenment”*. Both authors champion the view that science and technology may be the drivers of human progress, but at the same time had caused humanity to submerge in a new type of barbarity. This barbarism was not caused by the dominant political class, they suggested, but by a historically new understanding of technology that had seized hold of mass society. The most striking feature of this new form of what Max Horkheimer called “instrumental reason”, which he explicitly linked to logical positivism and Carnap’s emerging Chicago School, was its constant recourse to all humans and their social existence. This recourse led to ongoing de-humanization in a new, totally bureaucratic society. This process of de-humanization rested on capitalism, not only in the model of society à la “free West”, but also under state capitalism, a model they detected as existing in the command economy of the Third Reich and, after 1945, in Communist East Europe.

Erich Fromm, the renowned psychoanalyst who had been a member of the Frankfurt School for a time, describes how the historical path of Enlightenment, civilization and progress has always also been an ineluctable path into human barbarity in a book authored 30 years after his first writings, but no less radical in thrust, namely *“To Have or to Be”*, which came out in 1976. In the introduction, Fromm states that the industrial age is not able to redeem its major promises. Instead, people have to learn that:

- the satisfaction of wishes does not lead to well-being;
- individual freedom is destroyed by bureaucratic structures;
- the gap between the rich and the poor had become ever greater;
- the ecological consequences of technical progress potentially threaten the survival of the human species; and

- finally “our thought, feelings and taste are manipulated by industry and the state apparatus that controls the mass media” (Fromm 1976, p. 12).

This final idea in Fromm’s list shows quite clearly that his reference to the mass media was not essentially a matter of communications research in the narrow sense. The Frankfurt School did not conduct media and communications research *sui generis*. Instead, its members focused on a critical reflection on suppression or emancipation in contemporary capitalist societies. And in the case of this thinking on capitalism they then enquire into the social function of the mass media. And even at the end of the 1970s Fromm was still thinking within precisely this paradigm: the erroneous developments of the mass media, he diagnosed psychologically, are intimately bound up with the structural deficiencies of capitalism.

In terms of this paradigm, Adorno and Horkheimer’s “*Dialectic of Enlightenment*” is, or as I would suggest, a classic that remains of topical importance. Among other things, the book has a chapter on the “culture industry”. And to my mind the sub-title with its seeming contradiction, namely “*Enlightenment as Mass Deception*” is in terms of intellectual acuity infinitely superior to much of the trivial chatter of some of the current purportedly incisive essays on the ostensible link between the Internet and democracy.

To fuse the two words “culture” and “industry” into a new word “culture industry” was both in keeping with the Frankfurt School’s interdisciplinary outlook, i.e., the linking of “political economy” and “cultural studies”, and was decidedly new. At the same time, the concept of “culture industry” could look back on a very exciting intellectual tradition.

As early as 1835, in his famous treatise on the United States, Alexis de Tocqueville spoke of a literature *industry*, and Adorno and Horkheimer’s concept of 1944 was followed in 1950 by the film scholar Horence Powdermaker with her notion of the “*Dream Factory*”. In 1962, Austro-American economist Fritz Machlup then coined the term knowledge *industry*, and in 1964 German publicist Hans-Magnus Enzensberger published his trail-blazing essay on the consciousness *industry*.

I believe the following ideas in Adorno and Horkheimer’s idea of the “culture industry” are quite central.

In capitalism, the production of commodities is so overwhelming that there is no escape from them. For this reason, the masses make the commodities thrust upon them a matter of their own. They develop a form of ostensible activity, such as is to be seen, for example, in the effort to imitate the stance and appearance of a film star or a music idol. Even when propagating the ideal of the natural and the individual and recommending that its clients imitate this, the culture industry paves the way for standardizing individuality, thus turning it into its opposite. The culture industry only tolerates individuals “only so long as his complete identification with the generality is unquestioned. Pseudo-individuality is rife: from the standardized jazz improvisation to the exceptional film star whose hair curls over her eye to demonstrate her originality. What is individual is no more than the generality’s power to stamp the accidental detail so firmly that it is accepted as such” (Adorno/Horkheimer 1969, p. 163). In this reproduction of the eternally similar, under the culture industry there is

neither an autonomous individual nor anything qualitatively new. Culture industry is the opposite of innovation.

According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the culture industry always entails flight from everyday life. In its function as an agency of reproducing labor power, amusement through the culture industry is an extension of labor in capitalism. They write: “What happens at work, in the factory, or in the office can only be escaped from by approximation to it in one’s leisure time” (Adorno/Horkheimer 1969, p. 145). In the culture industry amusement creates an affirmative stance toward the status quo and eliminates thought, something that tries to bring itself to a standstill in amusement and with it the perception of one’s own suffering and that of others. Amusement is flight, they say, “but not from a wretched reality, but from the last remaining thought of resistance” (Adorno/Horkheimer 1969, p. 153).

Amusement customized to the culture industry promotes a trammeling of consciousness. For this reason, any culture industry has a fundamental manipulative tendency. Culture industry is dedicated to generating a basic uncritical/affirmative attitude toward the social status quo and thus foster integration of the masses with a view to dominating them. In the closed structure of an administered world in which only technical rationality prevails, the spirit of culture industry’s manipulation is of an objective nature: “The manufacturers function just as little as individuals as do their workers and clients; instead they are merely part of a machine that has taken on a life of its own” (Adorno 1983, p. 273).

Enough of the lengthy and difficult quotations from the “*Dialectic of Enlightenment*”. Let me instead present you in summarized form the five core statements in the chapter on the culture industry:

1. The subjectivity of media consumers is defined solely through their decisions to buy (passivity hypothesis).
2. Capitalistic media markets are manipulative (manipulation hypothesis).
3. The culture industry totalizes all areas of life to conform to the needs of capital (totalization hypothesis).
4. In the culture industry there is only a semblance of competition and plurality, whereas in fact there are no qualitatively new products (conformity hypothesis).
5. Taking the United States as its base, the culture industry increasingly strongly encroaches on all other cultures and countries (imperialism hypothesis).

These five hypotheses form the core idea underlying the Frankfurt School’s critical media theory. They need to be explored to ascertain whether they are still valid today, where they are worth further differentiation, and, above all, whether they have any relevance to communications research in Asia today. Let me offer a few ideas.

1. We must continue along the Frankfurt path of seeking in communications studies to find a consistent form of interdisciplinary research addressing the economy and culture.
2. Unlike other social theories, Frankfurt School Critical Theory is dialectic. It is thus far superior in terms of the insight it offers to the one-dimensional and harmonistic social theories (modernization and systems theory, constructivism, structuralism, and so forth). Dialectical thought is by no means limited to Europe. In Asia, as I understood it, dialectical thought is most in evidence in Taoism. Can we find a way of linking the Frankfurt School and Lao Tze?

3. The present economic world is shaped by accelerating globalization, and it likewise forgoes any regulation by the welfare state. But where a neo-liberal radicalization of the market occurs, a kind of turbo-capitalism arises that is far more radical than that which Adorno and Horkheimer encountered in the United States in the 1940s. Does this not imply that their hypotheses on the culture industry must be all the more valid today?
4. The totalization hypothesis in the "*Dialectic of Enlightenment*" is essentially based on an economic finding, namely that capitalism entails surplus production. What validity does this idea of surplus production have in Asian countries where the gross domestic product is growing faster than that of Europe but countries which, in economic terms, are still defined as societies of scarcity?
5. Large sections of West European philosophy hinge on questions regarding the individual's autonomy. And this of course also holds true for the Frankfurt School, if negatively. Theodor W. Adorno felt that the structural conditions of capitalism were always a decisive obstacle to personal freedom. Real freedom, or so he believed, could not exist; it was a quality that was to be aspired to in a utopian sense. But what is this quality of individual autonomy if there is no cultural basis for it? What is this quality, since it does not exist in Islam, nor in Hindu cosmology, Japanese Shintoism and certainly not in Chinese Confucianism?
6. In the early 1970s, Canadian economist and communications scientist Dallas Smythe traveled around the People's Republic of China. He returned with a depressing essay written. For he had established that the media and technology capitalism had also successfully penetrated China. In other words, if the media imperialism hypothesis in the "*Dialectic of Enlightenment*" continues to make sense and successively all cultures and countries receive capitalist media structures - and many empirical studies of the last 30 years specifically in Asia would definitely suggest this is the case - then we have the following question to answer: Do the cultures of Islam, Hinduism, Shintoism and Confucianism still exist as autonomous systems or are they residual quantities, like elements of folklore left in a homogenizing capitalist global culture?

## References:

Becker, Jörg: *Information und Gesellschaft*, Vienna: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Springer 2002.

Adorno, Theodor W. und Horkheimer, Max: *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente*, Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag 1969.

Adorno, Theodor W.: *Minima Moralia. Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1983.

Fromm, Erich: *Haben oder Sein. Die seelischen Grundlagen einer neuen Gesellschaft*, Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt 1976 [Quote: re-translation into English].

Marx, Karl: *Das Kapital*, Berlin: Dietz Verlag 1967.

Smythe, Dallas: *Counterclockwise. Perspectives on Communication*, Boulder, Col.: Westview Press 1994.

---

JÖRG BECKER, PhD is Professor for Political Science at Marburg University, Germany, and Innsbruck University, Austria. Since 1987 he is also managing director of the Centre for Communications and Technology Research Ltd in Solingen, Germany. He has published 30 monographs, 39 edited books and more than 200 articles on international and intercultural communication. Forthcoming is a monograph *Conflict and Communication. Studies in International Relations. Preface by Johan Galtung*, New Delhi: Concept Publishing House 2004. This commentary is derived from a discussion paper presented at the Inaugural International Conference on Asian Media Research, September 9-10, 2004, Singapore. Email: joerg.becker@komtech.org.